



Childhood Hunger in Texas

Impacts of COVID-19
and Solutions

MORE KIDS FACING HUNGER



The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a catastrophic health and economic crisis, pushing millions of families into poverty and hunger right here in the United States. In Texas, the new reality created by the pandemic has made it harder for children to access no-cost meals provided by schools and community organizations. **As a result, it is estimated that Texas now has more food insecure children—2.3 million—than any other state in the nation.¹**

Food insecurity looks different in every household. In some families, the pantry is completely empty. In others, parents skip dinner a few nights a week so their kids can have something to eat in the evening. No matter what food insecurity looks like, a lot is at stake for the children and families that experience it and for the communities they live in. When kids don't get the consistent nutrition they need each day throughout the year, it's harder for them to grow up healthy, educated and strong. Consistent access to nutrition is linked to cognitive and physical development, better long-term health, higher test scores and better education outcomes.

COVID-19: Impact on Child Food Insecurity



21.6%

of children were food insecure in
Texas in 2018¹



30.9%

of children now projected to be
food insecure in Texas¹

THE SOLUTION: STRENGTHENING NUTRITION PROGRAMS



Our nation's federal nutrition programs work together to connect children to the food they need. Many of these programs, however, are underutilized or can be difficult to access, especially during the pandemic. Eliminating barriers and maximizing participation in these programs will help combat rising child food insecurity in Texas. While strengthening these programs often requires federal action, state-level changes can play a major role. This section describes the various nutrition programs along with recommendations on how Texas can help these programs operate more effectively and reach more children in need.

School Meals

For many children, school meals are their only source of consistent nutrition. In normal times, when kids get school breakfast and school lunch, it leads to calmer, more focused classrooms where students are better able to learn. The importance of school meals has never been more apparent than when schools closed for classroom learning in the spring due to the pandemic. While learning models vary, with some schools operating only virtually or with hybrid models, school cafeterias have been operating continuously since March, providing critical nutrition to students across Texas.

Meals look different now, and school nutrition staff are coming up with innovative ways to keep kids fed through delivery, pick up and in person models. This has put considerable strain on school nutrition budgets, threatening to cause layoffs and cuts across these important departments.

OPPORTUNITY: Provide financial resources to help school districts, which have depleted their nutrition budgets serving emergency school meals, cover additional costs associated with safe provision of meal service, including meal delivery, transportation and personal protective equipment.

3.65 Million

The number of Texas students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals in 2019²

Pandemic EBT

Pandemic EBT, also known as P-EBT, was initially authorized by Congress in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P-EBT provides grocery assistance directly to households with children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals when schools are closed. The amount of assistance a family receives is equal to the value of school breakfasts and lunches that are missed. In the 2019-20 school year, P-EBT provided more than \$1 billion in federal dollars to assist Texas families, funds which, in turn, supported the state economy. Recently, P-EBT was re-authorized for the 2020-21 school year and expanded to cover children who receive meals at no cost through childcare providers.

OPPORTUNITY:

- Ensure that Texas participates in the P-EBT program for the 2020-21 school year, and encourage the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Texas Department of Agriculture, and Texas Education Agency to utilize all of the available program options to maximize access for Texas students and minimize administrative burdens on families and schools.
- Ensure that the application process for P-EBT assistance is easily accessible for all eligible Texas families, including through expanded data matching, and resources are available to conduct widespread outreach about the availability of grocery assistance, especially to rural and hard-to-reach communities.

SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a powerful tool for ending childhood hunger in the United States. SNAP provides eligible households with a grocery store benefit, averaging \$1.40 per meal per person, that allows families to purchase healthy food and ingredients. It helps decrease food insecurity, lifts kids out of poverty and is linked to better physical health and stronger academic success in children.

Before the pandemic, more than 1.4 million Texas households relied on SNAP to help keep food on the table.³ Now, as many families struggle with economic impacts of COVID-19, the program is more important than ever. SNAP is also one of the most effective forms of economic stimulus: money spent at local grocery stores and markets leads to more jobs, wages and local economic activity in the community. In fact, in a weak economy, every SNAP dollar that households spend expands the local economy by about \$1.50 to \$1.80.

OPPORTUNITY:

- With many Texans needing assistance for the first time, there is a need for robust outreach efforts to inform households about the program and help eligible households enroll.
- Ensure that the Texas Health and Human Services Commission has the resources to efficiently administer the program and effectively serve eligible families, and encourage the agency to implement available state options to streamline the application and processing of assistance to reduce the administrative burden on families.

Summer Meals

Summer is the hungriest time of year for many kids from families with low income because school breakfast and lunch are unavailable. Summer meal programs—which are operated by schools and community organizations and provide free meals at congregate sites to children 18 and under—can help kids get the nutrition they need during these difficult months. But, transportation challenges, bureaucratic hurdles and even extreme weather can become barriers to participation. As a result, summer meals only reached 7.2% of eligible children in Texas in 2018.⁴

OPPORTUNITY: Encourage more schools, local governments and community organizations to be summer meal program sponsors, and support innovations that help summer meals reach children in rural and hard-to-reach communities where barriers to participation are more prevalent.

Afterschool Meals

Too many kids don't get enough to eat between lunch and breakfast the next morning. Afterschool meals help kids get the nutrition they need once the school day ends. Having these meals reimbursed by the USDA also helps schools and community organizations save money and redirect funds into additional programming or staffing.

OPPORTUNITY: Bring awareness to families and schools about the availability of this program, and encourage the Texas Department of Agriculture to streamline the application and approval process for community organizations interested in offering meals through the program.



ABOUT NO KID HUNGRY TEXAS

For 35 years, Share Our Strength has been a nonprofit leader, creating innovative, sustainable ways to help people out of poverty. In 2010, we launched No Kid Hungry, a national campaign to end childhood hunger in America by changing the way that schools, communities and entire cities ensure hungry children have the food they need.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, children in Texas are facing an academic year unlike any before. 1 in 3 kids in Texas could face hunger this year. But No Kid Hungry is here to help! Throughout this crisis and its economic aftermath, No Kid Hungry Texas is working to ensure that policies and nutrition programs are adapting to meet the need of families and that schools and communities have the funding, flexibility, guidance and strategies to support children's access to three healthy meals a day—now and in the future.



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¹ The Impact of the Coronavirus on Local Food Insecurity, Feeding America, https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Brief_Local%20Impact_5.19.2020.pdf (May 19, 2020).

² Texas schools seeing steep declines in number of students getting free meals, Texas Tribune, <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/09/11/texas-schools-free-meals/>.

³ Kentucky, Missouri, and Texas Added to Innovative SNAP Online Pilot Program, USDA, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/04/21/kentucky-missouri-and-texas-added-innovative-snap-online-pilot>.

⁴ Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report, FRAC, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/frac-summer-nutrition-report-2019.pdf>.